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DRAMATIC ART IN AMERICA

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NOT long ago I stood at a street corner of a small New England town and marveled at the number of automobiles that rolled by. There seemed to be almost as many Ford cars as there were inhabitants, for the streets were more crowded with these vehicles than the sidewalks were with pedestrians. I observed also that the little city possessed all the advantages of modern civilization, so far as these made for physical comfort and convenience; there was every evidence of electric lighting and steam-heating; and nobody looked hungry. Shop-windows exhibited what I assumed to be contemporary fashions in clothes—in fact, it was clear that the people of this town had everything necessary for the sustenance, protection and adornment of the human body. It was a thoroughly contemporary American city, differing from others only in size.

Yet it had no actual theatre, no orchestra and no art gallery. When the people wished to hear a modern play or to hear great music, or to contemplate any specimens of pictorial art, it was necessary to journey to New York.

The absence of these necessities troubled me; it troubles me still; but what troubles me more than their absence is the fact that the inhabitants are apparently not troubled at all. They think they are comfortable; they think they are modern; they think they are civilized. "Because thou sayest, I am rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked."

Suppose Detroit were the only town in America permitted to have motor-cars and that in order to travel in an automobile one must first of all travel to Detroit, and there confine one's gasoline pilgrimages to the city limits; suppose San Francisco were the only city possessing electric lights and all others must use gas, candles, lamps and what not; suppose Chicago were the only place where coal was used in the heating of private houses and that, owing to some fantastic monopoly—perhaps not more fantastic than some other monopolies—one must live in Chicago if one wished to have one's house properly heated in the winter. How long would the people throughout the country endure this?

Of course they would not endure it at all. Indeed, many could not endure the absence of physical luxuries while enduring easily the absence of spiritual necessities. There is a pretty reason for this which need not be demonstrated.

Dramatic art in America does not begin to touch the national life as closely or as generally as does the automobile; it has not affected, it does not affect individuals and families in their habits of thought and way of existence as the motor-car has succeeded in affecting them. In Germany, however, exactly the contrary is true; music and dramatic art are both much closer to the national life, both have a much wider and profounder influence on the daily thought of individuals than any vehicle for transporting the body. Now I am not pleading for the abolishment of the automobile in America; I am suggesting that we provide in addition some opportunities for spiritual growth. It is a melancholy fact that the

only general and organized attempt on the part of national America to imitate Germany is to imitate the only feature of German national life which is abominable—military preparedness.

Suppose some Briton writes a first-class play; I suppose a Briton, because he is more likely to do such a thing than an American. Let us take a splendid example—*What Every Woman Knows*, by J. M. Barrie. This is a drama full of thought, full of action, full of charm—a really great play. Every city and town in the United States ought to have the opportunity of seeing and hearing it, and it would be an enormous gain if we could all see and hear it at the same time. What is the real condition? What are the terms on which an American may be permitted to see it at all? It is produced at one theatre in one town by one company. The management hopes that it will "run" there at least one year. During this year if any person in Cleveland, or Buffalo, or St. Louis, or Chicago, or Salt Lake City happens to want to hear this drama performed, he must journey to New York, and succeed in the endeavor to buy a seat at the particular building where it is being produced. After the lapse of one year, or perhaps two or three years, it may or may not be taken on the road, and it may or may not come within the range of the people living in the towns I have mentioned. Americans endure this situation in dramatic art without a protest; whereas if the case in question were some physical luxury, they would not endure it for a moment.

What is the situation in Germany? Why is it that the drama is there a real part of the national life?

WHERE PLAYS REACH THE WHOLE PUBLIC

When a new play is produced in one of the large cities, Berlin, Munich, Leipzig, Dresden, Breslau, Hamburg, Cologne, on a certain evening (sometimes there is a simultaneous first night in three cities) and the thing is successful, within a few days every city and nearly every small town in the German Empire produces the same piece. The result is that everybody in Germany is talking about the same play at the same time—enjoying it, discussing it, reading criticisms of it in the local paper. It is actually a part of the national life and the spiritual gain is enormous. Nor is this universal excitement in dramatic art confined to native productions; the moment an important new play appears on the stage of Paris, Petrograd or London it is translated and presented everywhere in Germany. The Germans are eclectic in art; they say "If any other country produces something valuable, it is necessary for us to have it at once and see what we can learn from it." They have the same curiosity in dramatic art that Americans have in mechanical inventions, devices to lower expenses and increase profits or a new system of dieting. Think of the enormous circulation in America of a book called "Eat and Grow Thin"! It might almost be called a national sensation.

One reason why Germany is so far ahead of America in dramatic art is because the opportunity

is provided for all. I am certain that if we had the opportunity we would take advantage of it. There is an immense amount of intellectual and spiritual hunger in America. The so-called "practical" and shrewd theatre-managers who are the shepherds of our souls have a lower opinion of our intelligence than the facts warrant. Over and over again they decline to give us good music and good drama, because they are so cocksure we do not want it. When John Galsworthy's new play *Justice* was brought to America it was offered in turn to a succession of dramatic managers, who contemptuously rejected it. "The American people will never stand for that high-brow stuff." Finally one person was found who was willing to risk the venture. To the amazement of the "practical" men the play turned out to be an enormous financial success; night after night the house was crowded.

That the American people desire only trashy plays and frothy music is a fallacy almost impossible to uproot from the managerial mind. In the midst of the hot summer of 1916 somebody in New York had the amazing audacity to hire a hall and announce a concert made up exclusively of the compositions of Richard Wagner. The thermometer reached about one hundred degrees that evening, yet the vast hall was packed and jammed with a wildly enthusiastic audience. Perhaps it is a mistake to suppose, first, that Americans do not want the best in art, and second, that their minds hibernate in heat. I remember, some years ago, when a thoroughly intellectual dramatic performance was given at a New York theatre, the interest was so great that hundreds could not get admission; and the next day the *New York Sun*, devoting a column to the phenomenon, suggested to theatrical managers that merely as a matter of business it might be well to consider the number of "high-brows" in New York—that perhaps it was not always necessary to scale every production down to a level of insipidity.

It is evident that two things are necessary before we shall have anything like a diffusion of dramatic art in America. There must be a stock company in every city, and every company must have the right to produce new plays. If I were a playwright I had rather make a small profit from each of many performances on a single night than a large profit from one. Although the stock company has never had a fair trial on a universal scale in America, the few illustrations of it that we have had are so strikingly superior to the star system that the case for dramatic art is already proven. In the eighties Augustin Daly's company presented both Shakespearean and contemporary dramas in a manner that fills one's memory with vivid delight; in the nineties Daniel Frohman's Lyceum company was incomparably the finest example of dramatic art in America; one was certain of a good production every time. I regard Daniel Frohman as one of our most high-minded and sincere theatrical managers. I believe he has been actuated always by lofty motives, for he has lent dignity to every undertaking associated with his name. I suspect that the period when he was in control of the old Lyceum Theatre represents some of the happiest years of his life.

American stock companies, however, are not merely memories. During the season of 1915-1916 Miss Grace George—a charming and accomplished actress—established a stock company in New York

that immediately took its place at the head of metropolitan theatres. Their presentation of Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara* was so near impeccability that it is no exaggeration to call it absolutely satisfactory. This was one of the four great events of the season; the other three being Hauptmann's *Weavers* (in English), Galsworthy's *Justice*, and the only original American play of any importance: *The Unchastened Woman* by Louis K. Anspacher. It will be observed that the proportion of excellent native productions is one in four; if this can be kept up for ten years, I shall be satisfied. America is so far behind Europe in dramatic art that if we can write one-quarter of the plays really worth hearing, we shall be doing well. Mr. Anspacher's comedy would be a credit to any dramatist in the world.

WHAT THE NEW THEATRE DID

The greatest day in the history of the American stage was the fifteenth of December 1908, the laying of the corner-stone of the New Theatre. As an American I am and always shall be unspeakably grateful to the Founders. They showed a generosity and a courage in this undertaking representative of the highest and purest patriotism. One would have thought that such a vast enterprise would have been "news"; would have been worthy of the ablest editorial discussion. Yet on the dawn of that historic day not one notice of the event did I find in any New York newspaper; and although the afternoon's exercises were graced by the presence of the Mayor, President Finley, Augustus Thomas, John Bigelow, Daniel Frohman and Geraldine Farrar, not one editorial could I discover in the big metropolitan journals the next morning. The closeness of dramatic art in America to the national life may be estimated by this uniform silence.

I am well aware that the New Theatre turned out to be a financial failure, and from the common point of view, no failure can be worse than that. But just as some financial successes do not deeply benefit the public, so there may be financial failures that leave in their wake permanent blessings. During the two years in which the New Theatre existed America had the greatest stock company it ever possessed; a company really on a par with the *Comédie Française* and the *Deutsches Theater*. It was a company that could and did produce contemporary plays so totally unlike as *Sister Béatrice* and *Don*, and produce both in a manner that left nothing to be desired. It was a company that—after the ghastly failure of *Anthony and Cleopatra*—gave the most thrilling performances of Shakespeare that have ever adorned our stage. It was a company that raised the whole level of dramatic art in America; that has made Americans more dissatisfied with cheap and sloppy acting than they used to be; that has left in the minds of many Americans a determination never to be satisfied until we have something like it again. No wonder that many individuals who have invested in theatrical management purely as a speculative business joined in a wolfish attack on this enterprise! Their sure business instinct told them of a mortal peril; they had little difficulty in recognizing 'a powerful foe. For if Americans should once become accustomed to a high standard of company-acting, as Parisians and Germans are, what would become of the tenth-rate stars backed by the speculators?

But it is not merely in a general way that the New Theatre has left its impression. Four distinct and specific results—all of great value—have followed more or less directly from its influence. Mr. Winthrop Ames founded the Little Theatre; and while in some respects this has been a disappointment, the performances under his direction are far better than those given in most New York theatres, and the emphasis is all on team-play. Mr. Granville Barker was induced to come to New York, and present under his own training and direction *Androcles and the Lion*, *The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife*, *The Doctor's Dilemma* and *Midsummer-Night's Dream*. Intelligent people may fairly differ as to the value of all of Mr. Barker's ideas; the blessed thing is that *he has ideas*, a scarce article in the American theatre. For my part I think the excellence of the acting in *The Doctor's Dilemma* was a revelation, and the stage setting of *The Dumb Wife* exceedingly beautiful. Third, Miss Grace George was emboldened to establish a stock company in New York that should present high-class dramas in a manner worthy of the best European traditions; and fourthly, Mr. Louis Calvert, literally one of the best actors in the world—who made a profound impression in every rôle that he played in the New Theatre—has determined to make America his home. In Grace George's company he shone with real distinction in *Major Barbara*, and in conjunction with John Corbin—also connected with the New Theatre—he produced in the spring of 1916 *The Tempest*, the most memorable Shakespearean event in a great Shakespearean year. I trace all four of these immense advances in dramatic art directly to the splendid experiment of the New Theatre. I hope the founders do not feel that their efforts were wholly in vain.

NEED OF MANY STOCK COMPANIES

When I say that the only chance for American dramatic art lies in the general adoption of the stock company and the universal right to produce new plays, I have in mind, of course, real stock companies conducted on the European plan. Meanwhile in many cities we have something that is worthy of high praise, for it is a step—only a step—in the right direction. This is the leasing of some theatre by a manager, who hires a stock company at rather low salaries and produces each week a once-famous play; with so small a price for seats that practically everybody can afford to attend occasionally. An excellent illustration of this system may be found in the city of New Haven, where Mr. Sylvester Poli bought the Hyperion Theatre, and now, with a fairly good company, gives representative plays with a weekly change of bill. The programme is sufficiently varied to be interesting; and Mr. Poli is a real bene-

factor in presenting such a play as Augustus Thomas's masterpiece *The Witching Hour*, one of the best of all original American dramas. This enterprise has been enormously successful; the theatre is packed at every performance; hundreds buy a weekly subscription ticket, retaining the same seats for the season; and it would be difficult to over-estimate the amount of pleasure that has been added to the lives of many persons, who look forward to the subscription day with unfeigned delight. Apart from the pleasure of witnessing farces, comedies and melodramas, this theatre acts as a kind of laboratory for students of the drama; for by specimens it really represents the history of the American stage during the last twenty years and affords in some cases the opportunity for young playwrights to produce an original piece.

With all its advantages it is not, however, the kind of stock company I have in mind. This remark would be absurdly obvious were it not that those who defend the star system always assume that "stock" means just this and nothing more. Mr. Poli's company is forced to give twelve performances a week; the same actors appear in every production and the leading actors always take the leading rôles. This entails a prodigious amount of work for rehearsals in addition to the time spent on production: no one has any rest, and one wonders when the actors find time to sleep.

In a high-class stock company there are no stars; he who takes a leading rôle one night does not appear at all the next night, and on the third night may have an infinitesimally small part. The members of the company have time to study, to rest, to visit other theatres, to live a normal life. Best of all, they are enabled to be really citizens of the town where the company plays, to secure a permanent home, send their children to the public schools, become members of society, with all the happiness and all the responsibility thereof. Actors and actresses are no worse than other people; what would happen to many of our so-called respectable citizens if they were in a different town every night, with no responsibilities and with nothing to do except between seven to eleven in the evening? A commercial traveler told me he faced more temptations in a week than I face in a year, and I believe him. In Munich the actors and actresses are as welcome in society as the college professors; one actor in 1904 told me he had just signed a contract that secured him a place in the Hoftheater until 1919! During all these years he has a home with his wife and children; he has an opportunity to advance in art by constantly studying new and different rôles. I could not help comparing his case with that of an American college graduate I met in Detroit, who was "on the road" in *Brewster's Millions* and had acted the same minor rôle in this drama for three years.

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